Teaching Joseph Conrad's

Heart of Darkness

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

A NOVEL IS A LONG, fictional prose narrative. A **narrative** tells a story. For most of human history, long stories were told in verse rather than **prose**. **Fictional** means that the story comes from the imagination even though many novels seem to be clearly related to the actual life experiences of the author. There is some difference of opinion about what constitutes "long," but in the case of *Heart of Darkness* the term "novel" is appropriate. The novel, traditionally, deals with real life or the possibilities of real life. Some critics would exclude such genres as fantasy or even science fiction from the category because they do not reflect life as it actually has been lived. For all its strangeness, the events of *Heart of Darkness* could have happened, and it therefore fits the narrowest definition of a novel.

Mythological/Archetypal Applied to *Heart of Darkness*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lay in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, developed long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a-life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Marlow's Journey as the Quest

1. Distribute copies of the *Heart of Darkness*: Archetypal Activity One: Information Sheet and *Heart of Darkness* Archetypal Activity One: Graphic.

2. Have students, either individually or in pairs, consider Marlow's journey upriver and complete the graphic to indicate which events and characters correspond to the elements of the hero's quest.

3. As a class, discuss how students have compared Marlow's journey to the quest, and then discuss the following questions:

    • What are the motivations for Marlow's journey? Do these motivations change? If so, how and why?

    • Is the snake metaphor for the river an ominous one? Why or why not? What archetypal qualities are associated with snakes?

4. Paraphrase the description of the river and its surroundings. How does Marlow cope with the physical and mental difficulties he faces?

5. As Marlow gets rid of his blood-soaked shoes, he realizes the object of his quest. Why does Conrad frame Marlow's thoughts on Kurtz in the bloody shoe context?

    • What does Marlow admire about Kurtz's death?
    • What is the result of Marlow's journey as the story ends?

New Historicism Applied to *Heart of Darkness*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the "truth" of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the "truth" is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the "losers" of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict "traditional" (i.e., the winner's) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it "reflects." To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.

Activity One

Inferring the African Point of View

1. Have students individually or in pairs or small groups reread the following passages, focusing on the indicated characters. Note: Within groups, students may want to select individual characters to focus on, as long as every character is covered somewhere in the group.

    • pp. 18-21 "The idleness of a passenger...out of sight somewhere."

        • prisoners, guard
        • Marlow
        • dying worker
        • chief accountant

    • pp. 40-42 "I went forward...my days at that time."

        • cannibal headman
        • Marlow
        • pilgrims

    • pp. 44-46 "An athletic black...impenetrable darkness."

        • helmsman
        • attacking villagers
        • Marlow

    • pp. 56-59 "Dark human shapes...before she disappeared."

        • beautiful native woman
        • Marlow
        • young Russian

2. Copy and distribute *Heart of Darkness*: New Historicism Activity One Work Sheet.

3. In their discussions, have the groups consider the following questions (on handout):

    • What are the examples of contrast between Europeans and Africans?

Psychological/Freudian Approach
Applied to *Heart of Darkness*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS "PSYCHOLOGICAL" OR "PSYCHOANALYTICAL" and "Freudian Theory" seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Exploring Freudian Interpretations of Marlow's Thoughts and Actions

1. Copy and distribute *Heart of Darkness*: Psychoanalytic Activity One Discussion Questions.

2. Divide the class into small groups and have each group review one of the following passages.

    • pp. 16-17 "The old doctor…center of the earth."
    • pp. 61-63 "I glanced…loose of the earth."
    • pp. 70-72 "She carried…too dark altogether."

3. Using the following questions as guides (on handout) evaluate the state of Marlow's psychological balance and how others may be trying to influence it.

    • What advice does the doctor give Marlow?
    • How does Marlow react to the doctor's questions?
    • What advice does the aunt give Marlow?
    • What is Marlow's reaction?
    • Interpret Marlow's feeling of being an imposter in terms of the superego.
    • What does Marlow do when he discovers Kurtz is missing?
    • How does the activity of the natives affect Marlow?
    • How does Marlow deal with his feelings of anger toward Kurtz?
    • Marlow feels he is "battling the spell of the wilderness." What does this mean?
    • Describe this passage in terms of a parent-child relationship.
    • What is Marlow's initial reaction to the Intended's look of sorrow?
    • How does Marlow respond to the Intended's questions about Kurtz?
    • What were Kurtz's last words?
    • What does Marlow tell the Intended that Kurtz's last words were?
    • Interpret Marlow's lie in terms of the superego and id.